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America's mysterio 'space base' down under

The Aussies are looking the other way

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Alice Springs is a desert town in central Australia—one of the few stops on the railroad and highway running the length of the continent through what Australians call "the Dead Heart." "The Alice" is isolated politically, as well, tucked away in Australia's staunchly conservative Northern Territory. In 1978, the Australian branch of the Ku Klux Klan was established in Darwin, the state's capital, by a Northern Territory police officer. "Territorians," it is said, don't like the ideas that come up from the southern cities—especially the idea of a better deal for Northern Territory blacks, the dispossessed aboriginals who inhabited Australia long before white settlement.

In 1965, the townspeople of "The Alice" were surprised to find that construction had begun on a road to the Mereenie water bores, southwest of the town. Locals had been pressing, unsuccessfully, for some time to have such a road built. No one connected the road construction with a visit from some American engineers a few months earlier. Too few of the townspeople knew of the visit to even make such a connection; it had been shrouded in secrecy. No one knew its purpose.

By 1966, the road had reached the water bores and was continued on to Temple Bar Creek and a valley called Pine Gap. It seemed to the people of "The Alice" that the road had been built to nowhere.

But the road did have a purpose. It had been built to the site of what was initially described as an American satellite tracking station. However, that "satellite tracking station" has proven to be a remarkably secret place for so innocent a purpose.

The treaty providing for the base reveals little about the facility's real nature. Although the agreement was made between the Australian and American defense departments, the Australian Defense Minister said at the time that the Pine Gap base had no military purpose. In later years, the Minister evaded questions about the base, using such phrases as "the need for security" and "the national interest," and enjoining all Australians to "trust the good intentions of the United States." The policy was in tune with Australian conservatism in the mid-1960s—a time when then Australian Prime Minister Harold Holt committed Australian troops to Vietnam, vowing to "go all the way with LBJ."

In 1966, the Australian government revealed that two domes housing radar equipment would be built at the "space base"—one eleven feet and one sixty feet in diameter. This was the last time that the parliament of Australia and its people received any official notification of construction work at Pine Gap.

In 1967, the Australian government declared a seven-mile security zone around the fifty-acre Pine Gap site. Two security fences were put up and patrolled twenty-four hours a day by Australian federal police and a special security guard. Aircraft were forbidden to fly within a four-kilometer radius of the base. Land owners in the nearby countryside were told to keep their visitors away from Pine Gap.

By 1969, two more domes, thirty-one feet and forty-eight feet in diameter, had been built. A fifth was added in 1975, and in that year the IBM 360/20 computer room was extended from 148 to 223 square feet. By 1975, it has been estimated, the United States had spent more than $250 million on the base, and construction still continued in secrecy. A sixth dome was added in 1977.

Despite the supposed "joint" nature of the Pine Gap facility, few Australian officials know the base's function. Two former Australian prime ministers, Sir John Gorton and Sir William McMahan, both said in later years that they were never told what went on at the base. A third, Gough Whitlam, said he was given only sketchy, after-the-fact information.

On October 25, 1973, during the Yom Kippur War, all U.S. military bases around the world were put on full alert. Pine Gap was placed on full alert too, as were the two other "secret" U.S. bases in Australia, North West Cape and Narrungar. It was not until two weeks later that Whitlam was told, informally, that the alert had taken place. Two months later, Whitlam said that "Australia had never been officially informed. . . . It was not consulted."

His words had a sad irony; on June 15, 1973, he had received a cable from his Ambassador in Washington, Sir James Plimsoll, assuring him of "auto-

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